

## **Consultation proposal by Fife Council**

### **Report by Education Scotland, addressing educational aspects of the proposal to proposal to close Wellwood Primary School and rezone the catchment area of McLean Primary School.**

#### **Context**

This report from Education Scotland is required under the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. It has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the Act. The purpose of this report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of the council's consultation proposal. Section 2 of this report sets out the views expressed by consultees during the initial consultation process. Section 3 sets out HM Inspectors' consideration of the educational aspects of the proposal and the views expressed by consultees. Section 4 summarises HM Inspectors' overall view of the proposal. Upon receipt of this report, the Act requires the council to consider it and then prepare its final consultation report. The council's final consultation report should include a copy of this report and must contain an explanation of how it has reviewed the initial proposal, including a summary of points raised during the consultation and the council's response to them. The council has to publish its final consultation report three weeks before it takes its final decision.

As the council is proposing to close a school, it will need to follow all legislative obligations set out in the 2010 Act, including notifying Ministers within six working days of making its final decision and explaining the opportunity for representations to be made to Ministers.

#### **1. Introduction**

1.1 Fife Council proposes to close Wellwood Primary School with effect from August 2014 and to rezone the catchment area of McLean Primary School to incorporate all of the current catchment area for Wellwood Primary School. It also proposes to offer children of nursery age places at McLean Primary School Nursery Class and seek alternatives uses for the Wellwood Primary School building.

1.2 The report from Education Scotland is required under the terms of the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*. It has been prepared by HM Inspectors in accordance with the terms of the Act.

1.3 HM Inspectors undertook the following activities in considering the educational aspects of the proposal:

- consideration of all relevant documentation provided by the council in relation to the proposal, specifically the educational benefits statement and related consultation documents, written and oral submissions from parents and others;
- consideration of further information on all schools affected; and

- visits to the site of Wellwood Primary School and McLean Primary School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

#### 1.4 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children and young people of Wellwood Primary School; any other users; children likely to become pupils within two years of the date of publication of the proposal paper; and other children and young people in the council area;
- any other likely effects of the proposal;
- how the council intends to minimise or avoid any adverse effects that may arise from the proposal; and
- benefits which the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

## 2. Consultation process

2.1 Fife Council undertook the initial consultation on its proposals with reference to the *Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010*.

2.2 The council received a total of 52 responses to the proposal to close Wellwood Primary School. 87% of the respondents were not in favour of the proposal. 100% of the parents of Wellwood Primary School, staff who responded and other interested parties do not support the proposal. The council received 51 responses (plus one comment) to the proposal to rezone the catchment area of Wellwood Primary School to McLean Primary School. 82% of the respondents were not in favour of this proposal. 100% of the parents of Wellwood Primary School, staff who responded and other interested parties do not support the proposal. 67% of respondents do not support the proposal to offer nursery children a place at McLean Primary School Nursery Class.

2.3 None of the children who attend Wellwood Primary School who expressed a view are in favour of the proposal. They spoke of concern at moving to a much larger school where they may find it difficult to make new friends. They feel they have very good opportunities to be successful at Wellwood Primary School and receive close attention from their teachers. Children felt this could be lost in a class with much larger numbers. They also expressed a view of Wellwood Primary School having a long tradition where previous generations of their own families had attended. They say they have very close friendships and cooperate particularly well across all primary stages. Children expressed concern about walking to school, particularly on the main road as it passes Queen Anne Secondary School. They question the fairness of the provision of a school bus for some of the Wellwood Primary School children but not all. They feel that all Wellwood Primary School children should be offered transport to McLean Primary School.

2.4 Views of the parents of children currently attending Wellwood Primary School are overwhelmingly against the proposal. They do not agree with the educational

benefits, as outlined by Fife Council, for their children in attending McLean Primary School. They feel strongly that their children receive a high quality education at Wellwood Primary School. Parents are concerned about their children going into classes of much larger pupil numbers. Those with children in P6 do not want their children to have to make a transition to a new school and then on to high school the following year. Parents feel staff at Wellwood Primary School know families in the village very well and are able to provide appropriate interventions where required. Parents raised concerns about the safe walking route to McLean Primary School as outlined by Fife Council. They accept that the walking route is now under review by Fife Council. The provision of a bus by Fife Council for some children at Wellwood Primary School and not others is viewed as unfair. Parents say that it will restrict children's access to after-school clubs and in general, the distance will make it challenging for parents without transportation to enable their children to participate in these clubs. Parents are investigating the suitability condition reports of the Wellwood Primary School estate as they do not agree with the statements made about the building and related costs by Fife Council. They are fully aware of the costs which are stated as being required to enhance the estate of McLean Primary School. Therefore, they are unclear about the statements regarding council savings should Wellwood Primary School close. Parents feel Fife Council have not given due consideration to the impact on Wellwood as a community should the school close. They feel families will not choose to move to Wellwood if there is no school.

2.5 Staff at Wellwood Primary School or McLean Primary School are against the proposals for reasons which are very similar to those of the Wellwood Primary School parents.

2.6 Other interested parties do not support the proposals. They feel there would be a detrimental impact on the community of Wellwood, particularly as the new Community Council is having a positive impact on the community. They do not feel there is a safe walking route and that the distance involved would be too great for some families. They raise the issue of inequality with regard to the provision of a bus for some of the Wellwood Primary School children but not all.

2.7 All parties raise the issue of planned housing for land opposite Wellwood Primary School. They suggest that Fife Council wait until new build projects are underway and then establish if this raises school occupancy sufficiently and makes the school more viable.

### **3. Educational aspects of the proposal**

3.1 The proposal by Fife Council is that children from Wellwood Primary School will commence their education at McLean Primary School from August 2014. The current occupancy levels at McLean Primary School show that children from Wellwood Primary School could be incorporated within the 14 class structure. The proposal states that children from Wellwood Primary School would be housed in permanent accommodation on arrival at McLean Primary School. They are currently housed in hatted accommodation.

3.2 The council's consultation proposal paper details some sound educational benefits for children. As part of a larger school, children will have more opportunities

for a wider range of learning experiences alongside children of a similar age. They will have the option to attend a wider range of activities outwith the school day and have access to an outdoor games facility. Children will have the opportunity to take part in residential visits alongside their peers. There will be greater scope for children to learn as a team or a group alongside their peers where they need to work collaboratively. The proposal does not make sufficiently clear how it will actually raise the levels of attainment children achieve.

3.3 There are larger teacher numbers at McLean Primary School to promote the benefits associated with Curriculum for Excellence. This means that children may benefit from curricular innovation and a wider range of differing staff skills which may promote a greater variety of learning and teaching approaches. However, the proposal does not make sufficiently clear the actual rather than potential improvements to the curriculum for children.

3.4 McLean Primary School has a larger management team and a full-time support for learning teacher all of which will be accessible to parents. However, the proposal does not set out clearly how it will improve on the arrangements for meeting children's additional support needs.

3.5 McLean Primary School has a purpose-built nursery class on site. Therefore, there is likely to be a continuity of experience when children are of age to move through to P1. The proposal does recognise that parents have a freedom of choice when selecting pre-school services within the authority.

3.6 Scottish Ministers have the right to call in decisions to close schools. The current timeline for this proposal does not give sufficient consideration to the possible impact of this process on the council's plans and on the children concerned, were the call in process to take place. If the council cannot advise children and parents until a late stage in the school year of the school they will be expected to attend in the following school session, it could be detrimental to the children's education because of the need to prepare for their transitions. The current timescale for the proposal will make it difficult to avoid this. In taking forward the proposal, the council needs to ensure that it provides sufficient time for effective communication with parents, staff and children to alleviate some of their concerns and ensure effective transitions for children.

3.7 The proposal does set out a case for securing best value from council resources. Wellwood Primary School has an occupancy rate of 23%. Children are educated in hatted accommodation which has been upgraded, is spacious and attractive. However, the accommodation needs further upgrading and it is the policy of Fife Council to move to educate all children within permanent accommodation. The overall efficiency savings are not made clear to parents within the proposal. It appears to parents that it is the intention of the council to spend significant sums of money on upgrading McLean Primary School.

3.8 Fife Council also gives some consideration to the impact the proposal may have on the community of Wellwood. The school is not presently used for community events but part of the building is a private dwelling. Further consideration

needs to be given to the information gained by the Parent Council, and indeed, all of the plans for future housing developments and the impact this will have on the long term viability of the school. The proposal gives details about the travel arrangements for children travelling to McLean Primary School from Wellwood. The safe walking route needs further consideration with regard to access and suitability of pavements at Queen Anne High School at times of congestion. The council policy of the provision of a bus for some children but not all within the village is causing concern for parents and needs to be fully explained and justified.

#### **4. Summary**

4.1 Fife Council has outlined some clear educational benefits of the proposal to close Wellwood Primary School. Children may benefit from working alongside a greater number of children of their own age. There may be scope for children to build their capacity through working collaboratively as part of a group and as individuals within a larger school setting. The proposal outlines opportunities for children to take part in a wider variety of out-of-class activity such as sport. The proposal would also enable pre-school children to make an easier transition into P1 and allow them to establish themselves within the school community from the age of three years.

4.2 There is significant opposition to this proposal. Parents are not clear about the educational benefits for their children, safe walking routes and transportation. They do not feel the council has set out the viability of the school in light of future housing development. The council needs to address these concerns within its final consultation report.

4.3 In preparing the final consultation report, the council has to make more clear to parents the viability of alternatives to closure and why it has rejected them. The financial position with regard to savings, and to what extent the proposed spend on the McLean Primary School estate will improve on the environment and resources for learning children enjoy at Wellwood Primary School currently, needs more clarity. The final report would benefit from a statement which outlines, for parents, why the proposals for new housing appear to have no bearing on the decision to close the school. In taking forward this proposal, the council needs to take into account the current timeline and set out how it will ensure sufficient time for effective communication and the careful planning of transitions for all children and staff.

**HM Inspectors  
Education Scotland  
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